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All That Glitters Is Not Gold

Death Valley is a land that sparks the imagination and lures the adventurous. The history of Death Valley is replete with legends and lore of hidden gold, lost and found treasures, outrageous hoaxes, and get-rich-quick schemes, all of which generated great public interest and intense media scrutiny. Though many would come to Death Valley in search of fortune and fame, the rugged land seldom and reluctantly relinquished its riches.

On January 5, 1999, a Death Valley National Park visitor delivered a mysterious trunk and its contents to park headquarters. The visitor claimed he had found the trunk under a rock overhang deep within the park's backcountry. A handwritten manifest and a letter in the trunk purportedly associated the find with the "Lost '49ers," a group of men, women, and children who traveled through Death Valley in December 1849 and January 1850 en route to the gold fields of California. If validated, the trunk would be historically significant, as only a small number of artifacts from this group of argonauts are known to exist.



Chest or trunk, date and manufacture unknown. Contents of the trunk have various dates and origin of manufacture. (DEVA63126) Photo courtesy Death Valley National Park, National Park Service.

At first glance, the trunk appeared to be a wonderful talisman of the personal possessions of a group of people headed for new beginnings in California. Upon closer scrutiny, however, National Park Service (NPS) staff soon discovered a number of discrepancies, and so began the long and methodical process of authenticating the "treasure."

The most obvious disparities included a lack of dirt or dust, scant evidence of insect or rodent damage, inconsistent corrosion of metals, and well-preserved fabrics. These conditions are not typical of a trunk stashed in a rock outcropping, subject to 150 years of sunlight, wind, dust, precipitation, and extreme temperatures. NPS museum conservation staff also discovered the presence of 20th-century adhesives.

NPS curatorial staff then contacted subject experts and historians from other NPS sites, area museums, regional universities, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Smithsonian Institution,

and Christie's Auction House, to assist in dating and verifying specific objects. Although many items are authentic to the 1849 period, a number of the items originate from later dates. For example, the pottery mark of a lidded ceramic dish dates from 1914 to the present; a doll's date of manufacture is approximately 1910; and all of the coins showed inconsistent wear patterns. In addition, one of the gold coins was conclusively described and dated to 1853!

The discovery of the Death Valley trunk generated a great deal of press from all over the world. NPS staff continues to receive inquiries from those who believe the trunk is not bunk, and from those intent on solving its mystery. The trunk is now located in the park's museum collection and NPS staff will continue to investigate the origin of the trunk and will determine what, if any, further actions will be taken.

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